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## 'Education was the main thing'

### Integrity, tenacity served Riley as S.C. governor and U.S. education chief

By MARK LETT

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Richard Riley worked the levers of politics, government and education for more than a half-century by giving respect, taking advice, setting expectations, staying focused and never giving up.

Most of all, he never gave up.

As it turned out, Riley did it right. His career has been as successful as it has been tenacious. Now 79 and living and working in his hometown of Greenville, Riley:

- Served two terms as U.S. education secretary during the Clinton administration, outlasting opponents who tried to dismantle the federal education agency.
- Was the first governor in South Carolina history to serve two consecutive terms, enjoying such popularity that the state constitution was changed to make a second term possible.
- Mobilized support to overwhelm anti-tax sentiment and pass a tax increase for public education in 1984, producing what Southern historian Walter Edgar called "one of the most important pieces of education legislation ever passed in South Carolina."
- Teamed up with other "young Turks" in the S.C. Legislature in the 1960s and 1970s to shake up the state Democratic Party, rattle an Old Guard establishment and roll out a progressive reform agenda that modernized state government.

Along the way, Riley became known as a determined power player of startling integrity — someone who checked his ego at the door and worked effectively with friends and foes across the political spectrum. The late political columnist David Broder described Riley as "one of the most decent and honorable people in public life."

Riley's reputation was so solid that President Clinton sought to nominate him for the U.S. Supreme Court in 1993. U.S. Sen. Strom Thurmond, a South Carolina Democrat-turned-Republican, offered to shepherd the nomination through the GOP-controlled Senate. Inside the White House, the calculation was that Riley — while lacking experience as a judge — had the credibility and interpersonal skills to bridge and balm the philosophical differences among members of the court.

Riley declined the offer, telling Clinton that he believed he



Dick and "Tunky" Riley at gubernatorial re-election campaign rally.



Leaders of the Young Turks of the 1960s and '70s gather for a reunion in 1989. Front Row, from left: Dick Riley, Nick Theodore, Bill Doar. Back row, from left: Harry Chapman, Alex Sanders, Travis Medlock, Isadore Lourie, Tom Smith, Dewey Wise.

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could better serve by continuing as the nation's education leader. The president relented, but returned to Riley when the Supreme Court had a subsequent vacancy, and again when Clinton was seeking a chief of staff during his second term.

Both times, Riley declined, citing his commitment to education issues.

"That's Dick Riley. He is a man absolutely without guile," says Alex Sanders, a friend and former chief of the S.C. Court of Appeals. "Another person would have given in to ego and the honor of being a Supreme Court justice. But Dick Riley could not be swayed to abandon the work in which he was engaged his whole life. There is no doubt he could have made that kind of contribution to the court, and there can be no doubt of Dick Riley's contribution to education."

A degenerative bone disease in his 20s left Riley with a fused back that altered his posture and walk. Sanders told a Washington reporter in the mid-1980s that the affliction, while weakening Riley's backbone, strengthened his force of will.

### 'THE MAIN THING'

To many South Carolinians, Riley continues to be known as the state's "Education Governor."

As a state legislator and then as governor from 1979-87, Riley placed education concerns at the center of his agenda, even as the state dealt with economic development, tight budgets, public-health needs and nuclear-waste storage policies.

To Riley, society's problems were inseparable from an education system that desperately needed improvement. Strengthen education, he proselytized, and other challenges could be made manageable. The cost for improving education can be high, Riley acknowledged, but the cost of retreating is greater.

"Education was the main thing for me, and it should be the main thing for the current governor," Riley says. "You still have people out there fighting for education just as much as anybody ever did. But when you get off track talking about vouchers and tax credits, when that gets to be the main concern instead of talking about more rigor and improvement in what you provide kids, it really is a diversion. ...

"Obviously, I don't like deficits and debt. But when you get down into the weeds of what do leaders support and how they are for education, I tell people they cannot be for education unless they are willing to hurt for education. That's the test, and you have to take some licks for it."

Riley, captain of his high-school football team in Greenville, took plenty of licks in 1983 in battling for what ultimately was approved as South Carolina's Education Improvement Act — a sweeping reform package that included a state sales tax increase to cover the act's costs.

Legislative wrangling stretched from days to weeks to months, and daily debates often raged deep into the evening and early morning. While Riley and his allies coaxed members of the Legislature to their position, Riley's wife, Tunky, sat in the State House balcony to show her support, even as she



Isadore Lourie with his son state Rep. Joel Lourie D- Richland , in the General Assembly.

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Dick Riley, Therese Knecht Dozier, Bill Clinton

RICHARD W. RILEY

**Age:** 79

**CAREER**

Partner, Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough, 2001-present

recovered from chemotherapy treatments.

The couple's resolve and teamwork was apparent throughout Riley's political life, including the early days of his first campaign for governor, when he trailed better-known candidates. Riley recalls that his wife gave his effort a shot in the arm when she appeared at a forum and was asked about her unusual nickname.

"Tunky is an old Indian name that means 'governor's wife,'" smiled the former Ann Yarborough.

Recalls Riley: "I tell you, people were so delighted by her that I went up by 4 percent overnight with voters."

The Rileys were an inseparable couple for some 51 years until Tunky's death three years ago this month. Riley and Clinton served as Southern governors at roughly the same time, and the couples are longtime friends. Riley directed transition operations for the Clinton White House, a demanding job that meant screening thousands of applicants for sub-Cabinet appointments in the new administration. Riley emerged as a valued, low-key advisor to the president, says Mack McLarty, a former Clinton chief of staff.

"I recall more than once where Dick's gentle but strong and firm voice and clear and persuasive thoughts carried the day with President Clinton and with me," McLarty says. "This was not only on matters related to education, but also other tough and complicated decisions."

#### 'THE RIGHT DIRECTION'

Riley's advice also was sought by then-President Jimmy Carter, who invited Riley to the presidential retreat at Camp David in advance of Carter's so-called "malaise" speech in 1979.

The televised address was Carter's appeal to Americans to search their souls and embrace self-sacrifice as one way to deal with a host of problems confronting the nation, including unemployment, inflation and an energy crisis.

At the top of the speech, Carter explained how he had solicited the views of many Americans in advance, including an unnamed Southern governor who had told him: "Mr. President, you are not leading this nation — you're just managing the government."

The governor was Riley.

"Carter was struggling with what he called a 'crisis of confidence' among Americans," Riley recalls. "If you look at where we are today, again there is a very negative feeling out there about a lot of things — the deficit and the debt, high unemployment, two wars, now three.

"It is very important for American leaders to try to come together and quit spending so much time on partisan issues and realize we have got to have a functional management of the government in a conservative way, but be very positive about our future and the growth that can take place if we all move in the right direction."

Riley notes that President Reagan captured the optimism essential to leadership when he campaigned for and won

Secretary, U.S. Department of Education, 1993-2001

South Carolina governor, 1979-87

Member, S.C. Senate, S.C. House, 1963-77

Legal counsel, U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, 1960

Partner, Riley & Riley law firm, Greenville, 1961

Operations officer, U.S. Navy, 1954-56

#### EDUCATION

Law degree, University of South Carolina, 1960

Bachelor's degree, Furman University, 1954

Graduate, Greenville High School, 1950

#### SERVICE

Chairman, Board of Trustees, Furman University

Advisory Board chairman, Riley Institute of Government, Politics and Public Leadership, Furman University

Vice chairman, Carnegie Corp. of New York

Director, KnowledgeWorks, Cincinnati

Co-chairman, National Commission on Teaching and America's Future

#### FAMILY

Widower since 1998 after 51 years of marriage to Ann "Tunky" Yarborough Riley

Four children, 14 grandchildren

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the presidency.

"But I would have told him, 'Mr. President, you are not managing the government, you are just leading the people,' " Riley says. "You need a president who does all that. I feel Bill Clinton had that balance."

Today's economic troubles, especially the sharp declines in home sales and values, have left many Americans in "shock," Riley says.

"People used to buy a home in six digits and it went up in value every year," he explains. "We got used to that, and all of a sudden the bubble burst. That stuns everything. Everything is so scattered now, with people on the Left being pretty far Left and the people on the Right being pretty far Right. Those in the middle are kind of moving around. ...

"The general public will settle down and decide what our vision of the future ought to be. You will get some form of stability and that will lead to some civility that will enhance the political dialogue. That's when good leadership moves beyond rhetoric and sound bites and does substantive things."

These days, Riley is a partner with the Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough law firm and spends much of his time on education matters. Among those: Working with the Riley Institute at Furman University on diversity leadership, helping to direct the Carnegie Corporation in New York City and serving on the board of the Cincinnati-based KnowledgeWorks in developing new schools to accommodate modern teaching techniques. He also has been called upon for advice by leaders working to establish a public school system in earthquake-ravaged Haiti.

Riley continues to be concerned about the impact of partisan battles on public education and what he sees as an antagonism among some Americans toward highly educated people, including ill will directed at public-school teachers.

He continues to prescribe a formula for improving education that includes setting high expectations for children, early childhood education, more rigorous instruction in science and math and programs to demand and develop quality teachers. Increasingly, he says, education must be more than a utilitarian outcome and must embrace school programs that involve the entire community, that enable students to learn in team settings where creativity, communication and problem-solving are required.

"Education is an alive issue. It never gets done," Riley says. "You just cannot quit. You go and you go and you go. I never see anything as defeated. It might be slowed down a little, but never defeated. You can't defeat something that is the right thing to do.

"There might be all kinds of interferences along the way, and they aren't all bad, but people will ultimately move in the right direction.

"And then the right thing happens."

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